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THE POETRY OF POVERTY.

BY HENRY BERNARD CARPENTER.

THROUGH such desolate fields, such *campos dolentes*, as those of Poverty, it is no inviting task to go in search of the flowers of poetry. Neither historian nor poet is often found there. Until recently, history has been little more than a tale of battles and treaties, of royal births, deaths, and marriages. To-day the History of the Poor is yet an unwritten chapter of human story. The same might have been said of poetry at the beginning of the last century. For ages Poetry minded high things, and rarely condescended to men of low estate. The heroes of song were not laboring, but fighting, men. Even Rama, the hero of the Hindu epic, is not, strictly speaking, a child of poverty; he is a royal, self-made mendicant. Those white-stoled hermits who figure in the background of the poem, as they glide through the dusk of Indian forests, are not the common poor men of the world. Come nearer to our own West; look along the advancing line of twenty-five hundred years of European song, and even Homer, the Father of Poetry, that high-throned earth-god, with time and the world to wait upon him—even he does not look down to the poor, but up to the rich, to the full-statured “kings of men,” to the strong and mighty in battle, to the ancestors of those princes at whose banquet-boards he sat and sang. In the “Odyssey,” if poor Laertes is there, it is not because Laertes is a poor man, but because he is the father of the “god-like Odysseus.” If Eumæus, the “divine swineherd,” is there, it is because among many apostates he remains faithful to a royal master. Open the “Iliad.” From beginning to end, the poor unprivileged man vanishes in the driving dust of the chariot wheels, in the roar of contending captains, in the rush and ruin of their spears. The man of the rank and file is scarcely heard, or, if at all, it is always in the briefest possible speech; he is that anonymous character introduced in one or two memorable passages in such words as, “Thus so and so,” or “a certain one would speak to his neighbor.” Only once is the so-called “friend of the people,” the “labor candidate,” permitted to make his best bow on the Homeric platform, and then he is no better than a cari-

capture. There he is ! poor diminutive Thersites, lame of one foot, bandy-legged, hunch-backed, hollow-chested, his peak-shaped head sprinkled over with a scanty nap of hair,—how he shrieks and spits his ineffectual spite at the princes of Hellas ! Such is Homer's "man of the people."

Before we leave Homer, we may look across at him who used to be regarded as his rival. If there be any one who deserves the unloved laurels as a Poet of Poverty, it is Hesiod of Ascra. Like all song which strives to sing itself steadily onward through the flowerless underbrush of penury and toil, his poetry is wanting in beauty. His two great poems, the "Works and Days" and the "Theogony," give us the two sides of a poor countryman's life—the world below, which opens reluctantly to his plough, and the world above, which is shut as remorselessly against his prayer. The first poem is a Poor Richard's Almanack for weekdays ; the second, a theological manual for Sundays. The first moves heavily, like the creaking wains and the slow-footed oxen of Hesiod's dear Bœotian plain ; the rough, unrhythmic verse is like the noise of mattocks and flails and rakes and harrows. The second, the Greek Book of Genesis, moves more freely and musically, as if it had caught some tones of that grave didactic harp once heard under Helicon. His song is the first and the last under a Hellenic sky which gives a picture of the life of the poor.

From Homer and Hesiod we pass to the triumvirate of the Greek drama—Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides ; among the towering forms of their men and women the figures of poverty are scarcely seen. Almost all their characters are kings in purple and fine linen, chieftains in bronze and blood, or gods in mist and flame. These lofty personages, however, begin to recede as Tragedy gives way to Comedy ; as Athené herself falls back before her own Athenian farmers whom Aristophanes leads on the stage from the flowery slopes of Acharnæ. That was one step toward the literature of Poverty. For Tragedy lives in the palace ; Comedy in the cabin. The Rich never laugh so well as the Poor. It is always those who are stationed at the outposts of wretchedness, those who stare hunger and vicissitude in the face, those who eat their bread with tears on their cheeks and chains on their hands and sickness at heart, to whom God has granted the compensations of laughter. The lower you go in poverty the broader you get in comedy. The slaves in the South, the *Davuses* in Terence,

the *Dromios* in Shakespeare, with old Plautus himself at the head of them, have made most fun for the world. A more pathetic instance of the returning of good for evil there cannot be than the oppressed repaying with smiles the frown of his oppressor. The Irish peasant not only forgives persecution, but makes the heart of his persecutors merry with "inextinguishable laughter."

Besides Comedy, another door of Poetry began to open to Poverty as early as 280 years before the Christian era. O pastoral Theocritus! O chosen voice of the Muses of Sicily! thy mouth drops the sweetness and murmurs the music of thine own Hyblæan honey-bees. In dreamful dells thou reclinest through the golden noon, while the air about thee grows enamored of the chant of thy falling stream and the whisper of thy woodland pine. Still sing to us and to the children of all time; still let thy piping shepherds pour to listening forest-gods the strains given back in soft replies of the Sicilian sea, and in the echoes of those hearts that will love thee forever! Nevertheless, the Idyls of Theocritus do not give us the poetry of the poorer classes. It is, rather, the poetry of summer poverty, of the happy, happy herdsmen of southern Europe. Only when the poet of Sicily leaves the land and embarks on the sea does he catch the real tones of poor men as they talk. His Idyl of the Fishermen is one of the most beautiful pictures and truest pieces of music ever given to the world in the name of poverty. Through the dimness of the night we can hardly see the two figures that couch close together in their ragged hut by the sea-wave, but we overhear their simple, hard-earned philosophy—such philosophy as seafaring men alone can give us.

"All things, yea, all things seemed to those men superfluous; for Poverty was their faithful partner. No neighbor dwelt near them, but on all sides was the sea."

The keynote for all poetry of destitution is struck in the prelude.

"Poverty alone awakens the arts; she it is who is the teacher of toil. For tormenting cares do not allow the laboring man even to sleep. For if he should taste a little of the blessing of the night, yet anxious thoughts haunt him and of a sudden break through his sleep."

This, however, is an exceptional passage in Theocritus, and in this respect Bion and Moschus, the other two members of the idyllic triad, are no better. With all their pastoral sweetness, they turn their backs on the poor and needy; they choose, rather, the mythic, artificial themes, and with chains of gold about their necks, they sit down and sing at the feet of the Ptolemies of Egypt. Vergil, who followed them at an interval of more than two centu-

ries, certainly put a crown of glory unfading on the head of every ploughman and vine-dresser in Italy, when he gave us those four gospels of toil in his "Georgics." How the world-wide sorrow of Man half utters itself in that long-drawn sigh with which he speaks to the toilers of the field! "O too happy husbandmen, did they but know the blessings that are theirs!" The choice of subject, and the tone of plaintive sympathy, deep here as it is elsewhere in his poetry, tell us how clear and true a singer of "the still sad music of humanity" was lost in the author of the "Æneid." That is a touching and beautifully-shaded picture, suddenly introduced in the battle scenery of the Roman epic, where he sketches the poor woman rising between midnight and morning to rekindle the smouldering ashes of the hearth, that she may provide for her little ones and keep her name unblemished in the world. Such a scene makes us wish that Vergil had made way in his "Eclogues" for truer pictures of the poor of his country. But as civilization advances pastoral poetry retires. For when, after slumbering for 1500 years, the poor swains of Vergil wake up and clutch their crooks, and blow again their oaten pipes in Spenser's Cuddies and Colin Clouts, the only shepherds whom we see are a set of grave professors, ponderous prelates, and fat functionaries of state, trying to cover up their corpulence in the threadbare smocks of Daphnis and Corydon, as they frisk and tumble to the tune of Elizabethan politics or Protestant theology.

We leave Spenser and look into that second universe which God created, and man has named William Shakespeare. With Shakespeare, as with his only brother, Homer, the poor too often are the unheroic multitude, unnamed and unknown, or, as he calls them, "the vile many," "the many-headed multitude," or "the vagabond flag upon the stream," which

"Goes to and back, lacking the varying tide
To rot itself with motion."

In his plays the poor, as individuals, rarely rise above insignificance; in groups, they are ludicrous; in masses, contemptible. But is this to be wondered at? As a rule, poetry and poets are in their tendencies aristocratic.

But long before the days of Elizabeth the note of preparation had been sounded. The Redeemer of human life and the Founder of spiritual democracy had said, "Blessed are the Poor." Across the darkness of twelve centuries St. Francis had answered,

“Blessed is Poverty.” The word of the saint was echoed across the tumult of five centuries more, and Wesley at Oxford proclaimed, “The Poor shall have the gospel preached unto them.” Heaven’s two messengers were already on earth, those two sons of thunder, gunpowder and machinery—gunpowder, the great leveller, to bring every Goliath to the level of every David, to put the cavalry below the infantry in the field, to make the weak as mighty as the strong; machinery, to create industries, to call into existence the industrial classes, and to turn the eyes of the earth toward the poor. The Poor needed a religion, and the Lord provided them with Methodism. The Poor needed a poet, and the same Lord provided them with him whom Byron declared to be

“Though Nature’s sternest painter, yet the best.”

Such a painter is George Crabbe, and as such he reminds one of a certain school of Alexandrian painters once known by the name of Rhyparographers. After Apelles had painted Alexander the Great and passed away, the world grew tired of the lofty classical subjects, of sparkling Helens and of languishing Venuses, and yielding to a common law in matters of fancy and fashion, it began to draw its materials from the opposite side of life. A new school of art arose in Egypt. Earthly and everyday subjects took the place of the old divine ideals. Instead of Mercury putting the sandals on the feet of Venus, it would be a cobbler patching up a pair of brogans. Instead of the unshorn Apollo, it would be a barber mowing down a man’s beard. Instead of Neptune’s horses or Juno’s pearls, it would be “dead sprats and herrings and oyster-shells.” The more classical Greeks did not favor these new artists; they named them Rhyparographers—that is, “dirt-painters.” George Crabbe is one of these. He paints poor men and women with the mud upon them, and he paints the mud very well. If he turns from Man to visible Nature, he is still rhyparographic. He gives us fine marine pictures, but he is not contented with giving us the sea only; he must give us also the mud at the bottom of the sea. He fairly enjoys painting those long banks of slime left bare by the retiring tide. Like the Anglo-Saxon race, to which he belongs, Crabbe is never very much pained by the unloveliness of the things about him. On the contrary, he takes kindly to the mud of life. But it is wholesome mud; like that now and then uncovered along the coast, it exhales loads of fine moral balm for the breather.

In this respect, though in style the same, yet in matter Crabbe is the very antithesis of Pope. Hence it was said that Crabbe was "Pope in worsted stockings." In him the Poet of Twickenham was come again from the dead. But it was no longer little Pope in his coat of peach-colored satin, with gold-headed cane, shuffling along between quaintly-clipped hedgerows, and in and out of his grottos of glittering stones; it was no longer Pope at the tea-table with exquisite tattlers and stilted statesmen, among fans and feathered dowagers; but Pope in dingy drab, pacing the pale sands and prosaic shores of Aldborough,—Pope in the poor-house beside the pauper's death-bed, in the court-house beside the outcast woman, in the darkened cottage beside the desolate wife, in the dungeon beside the condemned criminal, on the ship-wrecking shore beside the wail of the new-made widow,—Pope not in the city and the court, but in the country and the cottage; not in the trim, smooth garden, but in the rough, open world.

As the Poet of Poverty, Crabbe achieved his first success in 1783, when he published his "Village." The date is of importance, as it indicates the point where he starts, and also those who followed and those who preceded him in his peculiar line of poetry. In temporal sequence, Cowper, Burns, Wordsworth, all come up behind him. But others had been before him on the paths of poverty. Poetry was glad to follow any one who would take her by the hand and lead her out of the city and the neat suburban gardens into the country with its free grass and unkempt hedges. While Pope and others were epigrammatizing of the city and of riches, Allan Ramsay was singing of the country and of poverty. His "Gentle Shepherd" was followed by Shenstone's "School-mistress," Mickle's "Mariner's Wife," Gray's "Elegy," Beattie's "Minstrel," and, last of all, by Langhorne's "Country Justice," which, in its heroic couplets, its choice of subject, its mode of treatment, as well as in point of time, is so near the poetry of Crabbe as to make us feel that the Poet of Aldborough must have come under the influence of its example.

The mention of Crabbe's "Village" may carry back the mind of the reader to Goldsmith's "Deserted Village," in which, thirteen years previously, the poor Irishman had opened a path for the poor Englishman into the field of poverty. There is this great difference, however, between the Irishman's "Village" and the Englishman's, as also between their delineations of the

poor : Goldsmith's is rather the ideal village—the village that has been ; Crabbe's is the real village—the village that now is. Over Goldsmith's little commonwealth there is diffused a tender glow, as of the dying day; a pensive, lingering light of sentiment, which tones down the sharp outlines of distress and pain till they grow beautiful in the hues that invest them. No such figures will ever again be produced as Goldsmith's village schoolmaster, his crippled soldier, his compassionate old parish clergyman. But these are ideal figures, such as Crabbe, the realist, would have never drawn. In the treatment of the same or similar characters he seldom enhances his effects by any sidelights or varnish. He takes pains to scour the glass of his pictures so thoroughly that you forget the medium and see only the objects behind. Crabbe is, *par excellence*, the Poet of the Poor; he paints Man, not in his power and lordship over life, but Man in his poverty, in his dependence, his conflict, his privations; in brief, in all those painful conditions—mental, moral, material—created and forced upon him by poverty. If he turns for a moment from Man to Nature, it is to see Nature also in her poverty; never in her glory and joy, in the pomp and prodigality of her life and power. She is always pinched and poor; nearly always sober; at her best, severe. It is not Nature such as she appears to tourists, artists, vision-seers; it is nature such as poor people look at it—a workshop, a cabbage-garden, a grave; never a play-ground or a paradise. Such views may be more painful and less picturesque; yet they lead us more intimately into that life of which Crabbe is the stern and faithful exponent.

Before passing from this writer, a few points may be briefly noted. And first of all, his Realism. Of the two schools of art, which, it is presumed, will always be found side by side, with a reaction perpetually going on between them, Crabbe is certainly not of those who work with special regard to what is beautiful, but of those who pursue their art with exclusive reference to what is true. Excess of truth soon becomes falsehood. Here there is truth to the exclusion of beauty, and therefore we find less than half of life within the sterile, contracted area of what is characteristically the Poetry of Poverty. The climax in art had been reached; the world had seen what men and women might be; the anti-climax was now touched, where people must be seen as they are. The stark, homely, grotesque way of

looking at men and things is pleasing to not a few. It was especially so to a thorough-born son of Saxon Suffolk, such as was George Crabbe. There is a strong local resemblance between his poetry as it grew up on the Suffolk coast and the painting which had already grown up on the shores of Holland, just opposite. Crabbe is a painter of the Dutch school; he gives us what we know as the *genre* picture,—low interiors, smoky rafters, dingy walls, with cracks and stains; plain, heavy-looking men in blue blouses, red night-caps, and hob-nailed shoes; mugs of ale; long clay pipes fuming through their fuddled fingers; the high lights on their bull-dog foreheads, and their thick, polished red noses; a fat, culinary sort of woman in the background, and very unimaginative children looking in at the door. Such are Crabbe's pictures, if we only leave out of them all the broad mirth and farcical fun which poverty often brings along with her as one of her best compensations, when she makes us laugh or be laughed at. But what fun is there in a Parish Register? This, however, our poet takes, photographs the men and women therein, describes how they look and what they feel as they stand at the font, before the altar, round the grave. So realistic is he that, as you read him, it sounds like the *Police News* turned into poetry, or the "City Directory" put into heroic couplets.

George Crabbe is also, and that in a preëminent degree, a Poet of Tragedy. Out of pure sympathy with suffering, he prefers to look at life from its darker, more tragic side. Like Milton, like Young, like Wordsworth, he seldom laughs. Sparing in his comic touches, he is often powerful in his tragic strokes. With evil he deals in all his pictures—evil as it presses so sharply on the life of the poor. But how different is his treatment of it from many preceding writers. Swift snarls at it, Pope sneers, Johnson scolds. Chaucer rather laughs at evil, and then lets it go. Crabbe approaches evil seriously, even sadly; examines, condemns, but seldom lets it go without a sentence of pity and pardon. At any rate, he never leaves the picture on which he is engaged till he has made you feel that conscience has fought her way back to her throne through the civil war of the passions; the penalty has been inflicted, the spirit repents, justice is satisfied, and, as the curtain drops, the disordered balance of life is restored.

With Man in those situations of pain and poverty in which Crabbe prefers to place him, no background could be more in

keeping than those silver-grays and that pale wintry sunlight spread over all his landscapes. This pictorial effect is best given in a couplet of his own. "With mingled tints"—for Crabbe does not make use of colors, but rather tints, just as his characters seem never to laugh, but only to smile—

*"With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,
And a sad splendour vainly shines around."*

And yet, as on a day of thick mist in the country the presence of the chill, cheerless vapor serves, as may be often noted, to bring out more vividly than in sunshine all the objects near the ground,—the bright green of the wayside ferns, the scarlets and yellows of the flowers, the tints of the rock in all their sharpness and clearness,—so this very sadness of atmosphere in the poetry of Crabbe seems to aid him in his observation of smaller and lowlier things.

As a Marine Painter, Crabbe is among the first. Some poets there are who have made the sea their own. Byron and Shelley sing of the sea as yachtsmen; Swinburne, as a swimmer; Allan Cunningham, as a first-mate; Falconer, as a shipwrecked sailor;—but Crabbe, as a dweller beside its waters, as a watcher of its wonder, as a lover of all its terror and its mystery. He knows "the unwieldy porpoise" as it "rolls in view"; the distant petrel that swims with her brood through the troubled spray; the wild ducks that glide in their wedge-like figures, in level line, from the north; the sea-gulls that drop for prey into the surge, face round with rallying cry against the blast,

*"Or clap the sleek white pinion to the breast,
And in the restless ocean dip for rest."*

Thus viewed as a Painter of Man and of Nature, Crabbe, in his relation to those who preceded and those who followed him, is preëminently the Poet of the Poor. In Burns, the joy of existence and the sympathy with nature, together with all the colors and sounds of this ever-varying world, help to mitigate the rigorous severity of that life which enters with its sharp edge into the soul of poverty-stricken man. In Wordsworth, the poor men are too often philosophers in shirt sleeves. Wordsworth's hero, a preaching peddler, is Wordsworth himself. Such poems as Tennyson's "Dora" and "Enoch Arden," Hood's "Song of the Shirt," Elizabeth Browning's "Cry of the Children," Longfellow's "Evangeline," Whittier's "Mabel Martin," are the exceptions rather than the rule, such as we find it in Crabbe. If too much of a good

thing is objectionable, too much of an evil thing is to be condemned. One such song as Trowbridge's "Vagabonds" ("Roger and I") is enough. Once done, and in so masterly a style, we should soon become nauseated if we found two such tramps extended to eight volumes of them, as in the collected works of George Crabbe. Carleton, in his "Farm Ballads," and Robert Dinsmoor, still truer to poverty, will always be welcomed as interpreters of country life in America. But, as a rule, the New England farmer and his agricultural brethren in the United States are altogether too comfortable to be included in that class of sufferers which is embraced in the literature of destitution.

William Barnes, the Dorsetshire poet—the Burns of South Britain (if ever there could be a second Burns)—claims far more than this merely passing reference, holding, as he does, the first rank among the poets of rural life. Poverty, however, as such, is not the chosen theme of his song, as it is from beginning to end in the verse of Crabbe. To Crabbe, therefore, we concede the wreath never won by any singer of Greek, of Roman, or of English song—that wreath for which he wrought—that wreath which he so justly made his own. No laurelled garland it is, but a crown of thorns. Such as it is, let him wear it; while to his eternal praise be it said, and to the praise of those who, before and after him, touched on these themes of penury and mortal pain, that it was the Poetry of Poverty, born in the eighteenth century, which built the bridge across the widening chasm between the rich and the poor in England. In France, now just a century ago, no such literature had arisen, which by its timely intervention might have softened, then brought nearer, and at last cemented the sundered strata of society. On the English side of the Channel, when the shock of revolution did come, if it was not followed by a social rupture so terrible and so permanent as in France, the causes are to be sought in the character and institutions of the people of the British Isles, and, in no small degree, in the influence then exerted by their literature. In such an influence not the least powerful element was the form which poetry had just assumed, and foremost among those who had been softening the antipathies of the classes so often on the verge of civil war was he who was contented to wear the lowliest laurels in behalf of the lowliest of men and women,—George Crabbe, the Poet of the Poor.

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